

THE ARRIVAL OF THE REVENANTS

GIORGIO DE CHIRICO AND NEOMETAPHYSICAL ART AT THE FRONTIERS OF TIME

Lorenzo Canova

A young man in a toga rows a small boat inside a room where a mythological and unreal sea appears; a door between an armchair, a closet and a chair, opens towards a passage full of enigmas; from the only window in the room mysteriously you see a landscape over which an ancient Greek temple looms: however, this composition, visionary and apparently absurd, turns into the symbolic image of a great artist's magnificent final years, a painting in which Giorgio de Chirico sums up the metaphorical spirit of his splendid and late neometaphysical phase in its entirety.

As if driven by a revelation similar to that which generated Metaphysical Painting in 1910, having reached 80 years of age, Giorgio de Chirico faces the last stage of his terrestrial and painterly journey, as his voyage on the sea of art continues in circular routes inside his studio, similar to a vessel, with the easel as the boat's mainmast and a window as its hatch. The floor planks become those of the deck from which the captain scrutinizes the sky, the winds and the tides, to find the best route.

The painting *Return of Ulysses* of 1968 (fig. 1) opens this new phase and, significantly and allusively, the boat is not the heroic ship of myth but a small rowboat, almost equal to that with which Hebdomeros, the protagonist of de Chirico's masterpiece novel, sailed in his room in the 1920s, a metaphysical, humble and ironic little boat of an artist accustomed to facing the great enterprises of art with the tools of painting and writing: "Hebdomeros had to flee. He went all around his room in a boat continually forced into a corner by the undercurrent and, at last, abandoning his frail craft and gathering all his strength and skill as a former gymnast, he hoisted himself up to the window which was placed very high".¹

That very same year, a similar boat is seen in the *Return of Hebdomeros* (fig. 2) in a painting in which a scene analogous to those of the Mysterious Bath theme of the 1930s is amplified in a multiple space suspended between inside and outside, between waking and sleep, as if the painter's studio opened up wide upon a landscape of Mediterranean memory, a place that emerges from the depth where the architecture evokes the piazzas of the artist's youth. The curtain or "sail" is reminiscent of the one found in the 1910 painting *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (fig. 9),



fig. 1 G. de Chirico, *Return of Ulysses*, 1968, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

¹ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, Éditions du Carrefour, Paris 1929; English translation, The Four Seasons Book Society, New York 1966, p. 60.



figs. 2, 3 G. de Chirico, *Return of Hebdomeros*, 1968, and *Mysterious Baths, Arrival from the Promenade*, 1971, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, previously Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

in which a Florentine church is transformed into an oracular temple. Thus Hebdomeros comes back from the Mysterious Baths, to the beginning of Metaphysical Art, to the Italian Piazzas and the native sea of Greece that seems to allude to an ideal return to infancy, as happens in the almost twin painting *Mysterious Baths, Arrival from the Promenade* of 1971 (fig. 3).

A theme taken up once more with an important variation in 1973, *Return of Ulysses* (fig. 4) is thus a sort of programmatic manifesto of de Chirico's Neometaphysical Art: the sea has reappeared in the "packet-boat" room and a young Odysseus rows, perhaps taking a circular route in the wake of Nietzsche's Eternal Return or heading this time for a precise place; the direction of the tide indeed seems to lead from the left side of the room, where an Italian Piazza from the artist's first metaphysical season hangs on the wall, towards a window looking out on a classical Greek landscape, perhaps a memory from childhood, with an ancient temple on an arid hill in the blinding Mediterranean noontime light. Ulysses is thus returning to Ithaca and de Chirico is returning to his childhood, to Greece where he was born, where he spent his first years and where his beloved father died, to be missed and mourned over for the rest of the artist's life. The return is therefore double, embodied by the same figure, Ulysses-de Chirico that, as often happens in the artist's work, has meanings that overlap in its vast profundity. However, Ulysses' journey seems to have a further meaning and destination: in a poem in prose written 60 years earlier, *The Weary Archangel*, de Chirico had already linked the internal journey made in his room to the uneasy figures of revenants that through "the half-open door" crowd into his antechamber: "My room is a beautiful vessel in which I can take adventurous voyages worthy of a headstrong explorer. In the anteroom the revenants crowd. What do they do while I can't see them? While the wall's motionless curtain remains drawn between them and me? Nobody could tell me. Whenever, curious, I leave my work and approach on the tips of my slippers that half-closed door and look into the mystery of that anteroom, they always appear in the same natural poses. True still lifes. [...] But when I go away and see them again only with my mind's eye, when I aim my gaze like the metallic dart of drill on the wall-curtain then, oh then every revenant seems still another, and behind every curtain I hear things moving that I've never imagined".²

2 G. de Chirico, *L'arcangelo affaticato*, 1918, in G. de Chirico, *Il Meccanismo del pensiero. Critica, polemica, autobiografia 1911-1943*, edited by M. Fagiolo, Turin 1985, p. 53; English translation, *The Weary Archangel*, in this periodical.

fig. 4 G. de Chirico,
Return of Ulysses, 1973,
Musée d'Art Moderne de
la Ville de Paris, previ-
ously Fondazione Giorgio e
Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 5 G. de Chirico,
Ulysses, 1922



Speaking of Carrà, but actually to speak of himself (as he often did), de Chirico then evoked: “The nostalgic perspectives of the rooms; the latitudes and the longitudes of the ceilings and the floors whose desperate escape goes off to die in the rectangular embrace of the door half-open on the mystery of the antechamber – like the stone shifted on the empty grave of the resurrected man – or of the window open on the splenetic tiredness of the city that has grown flabby in the everlasting and jousting orgasm of life. Very sweet revenants sit cautious and severe among these geometric magics”.³

Thus the “packet-boat room” has its routes traced out on the ceilings and on the floors, in the direction of the half-open door that, with an ancient sepulchral symbol, alludes to a passage toward the hereafter that nevertheless is not effaced with death but finds a further and vital dimension in the figure of the Risen Man that leaves his sepulchre empty and with the revenants that, thanks to the metaphysical opening of that door, can enter the artist’s studio looking for consolation to give and to receive.

In the 1968 painting, Ulysses does not have a beard and does not appear to be marked by years and by adventures like the Ulysses that Chirico had painted in 1922 (fig. 5), and his serene youthful look seems to go down into the dimension of that *eternal present* that was so dear to the artist: Ulysses rows on a sea that appears inside a luxurious bourgeois home and at the same time he is once again the ancient hero, who with his journeys, founds the archetype of every journey and every return home after a long war. The door is there, open, ready to take de Chirico-Ulysses towards the *revenants*, the dear figures lost many years before that he can only find again through the sacred and symbolic door that leads toward a metaphysical elsewhere.

From 1968, de Chirico thus undertakes a new journey, after the many departures and the many returns that have marked his life and his work, in the rediscovery of his Metaphysical Art and his youth, in a vision of circular time that unites Heraclitus, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in his idea of the *eternal present*, where all past and future time are blended together at a simultaneous point where time seems to annihilate itself in the dimension of eternity.⁴ Thus present time and past coincide and the very idea of temporality can be

3 G. de Chirico, *L'arte metafisica della mostra di Roma*, in “La Gazzetta Ferrarese”, 18 June 1918, published in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1. Romanzi e Scritti critici e teorici 1911-1945*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, p. 662.

4 For de Chirico’s Neometaphysical Art, see M. Calvesi, *La “nuova” Metafisica*, in *De Chirico: La nuova Metafisica*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi, sede RTV, già Palazzo dei Congressi, San Marino, De Luca Editore, Rome 1995; *Giorgio de Chirico: Gioco e gioia della Neometafisica*, exhibition catalogue edited by L. Canova, Palazzo ex GIL, Fondazione Molise Cultura, Campobasso, Regia Edizioni, Campobasso 2014.



fig. 6 G. de Chirico, *Calligrammes, The Wine-grower of the Champagne Region*, 1930

overturned: “The Ephesian teaches us that time does not exist and that on the great curve of eternity the past is the same as the future”.⁵

Not by chance, speaking of his seated mannequins and archaeologists, destined “to inhabit rooms” with low ceilings, which were to be among the greatest protagonists of his Neometaphysical Art, de Chirico had spoken of these characters as “condemned to an immobility that resides on the great plane of Eternity where one can shift the angle of his gaze and think of time backwardly”.⁶ Return and departure therefore seem paradoxically to coincide, at the point of intersection with eternity.

“As for de Chirico’s mythography”, Maurizio Fagiolo dell’Arco writes, “it must be noticed that the true themes are two: the departure of the Argonauts and the return of the prodigal son. Departure is a traumatic separation, with autobiographical references [...] but also with a destiny of journeys and disappointments, of adventures and

depressions, down to possible conquest (like gold for the alchemist)”.⁷

In the last years of his life, comforted by the certainty of the immortality of his work and eternity, Giorgio de Chirico thus reopened his perspectives, overturning them toward a point of timeless intersection in which rooms and their objects, wooden set-squares and the boxes that contain other paintings open up into an endless game that goes over de Chirico’s whole existential and artistic time, illuminating some mysteries and recomposing others.

Thus Ulysses’ journey heads toward Ithaca, but Greece, which appears luminously through the window, is at the same time a place of birth and death, the place where the painter knows he can meet his father beyond the door that can be traversed as a *revenant*, by engineer Evaristo de Chirico, *revenant*, returning and melancholic, or by Giorgio himself who has come to the end of his terrestrial journey and waits to finally discover the mysteries hidden behind the darkness of that half-open door.

“We are explorers ready for new departures”,⁸ de Chirico had written in 1918, and the return itself can therefore allude to a new departure, where Ulysses himself seems to orientate the painter’s new journey on the returning route of Neometaphysical Art.

The curtain opens

De Chirico thus sets out on a new journey that will take on a different form, on the route of new neometaphysical revelation: the fact is that the artist’s serene state of mind, after the melancholy and the feeling of abandonment of his youth (well represented by the statues of Ariadne in his Italian Piazzas), complete

5 G. de Chirico, letter to G. Apollinaire, 11 July 1916, *Letters by Giorgio de Chirico to Guillaume Apollinaire: Paris-Ferrara (1914-1916)*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 7/8, 2008, p. 616.

6 G. de Chirico, *Naissance du Mannequin*, 1938, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 1/2, 2002, p. 278; English translation *Birth of the Mannequin*, p. 283.

7 M. Fagiolo, information caption *Il figliol prodigo*, 1922, in *De Chirico. Gli anni Venti*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Fagiolo, Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Palazzo Forti-Galleria dello Scudo, Verona, Mazzotta Editore, Milan 1986, p. 88.

8 G. de Chirico, *Zeusi l’esploratore*, April 1918, dedicated to Mario Broglio, in “Valori Plastici”, 1918, a. I, n. 1, p. 10; English translation *Zeuxis the Explorer*, in this periodical.

the feeling of consolation already present in his works from the 1920s and is illuminated with a more complete internal shine that nevertheless does not diminish the importance of this phase, but instead helps to understand better the entire development of the *Pictor Optimus*' work. A new period begins, one which is conclusive but marked by light and the concept of return. Time turned back to front brings new splendour along with it.

The novelty of Neometaphysical Art is that de Chirico, after the long reflective phase of the second post-war period in which his reprises of early Metaphysical Art were often literal and driven by market demands, from 1968 on built

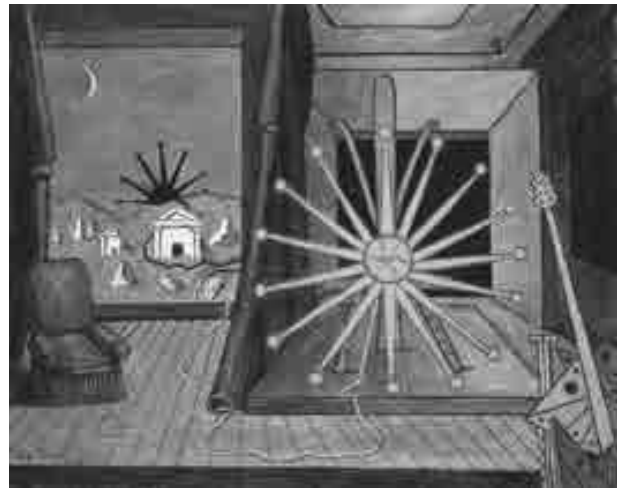


fig. 7 G. de Chirico, *Sun on the Easel*, 1973, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

up a “different” iconographic system in which the elaboration of his creations does not appear as a simple (though always splendid) repetition of the past, but as the fruit of a new and bright period of creation in which the artist reread and interpreted his early metaphysical season contaminating it with the immense iconographic apparatus of his works of the 1920s and 1930s in order to achieve new results.

“The true moment of the ‘revelation’”, Fagiolo dell’Arco writes, “can be found in his ultimate phase: the festive reprising of metaphysical themes (as in a valley of Josaphat) when all the characters come back onto the stage, all the symbols seem to be clarified, all the mysteries appear less dark in those little theaters of memory in which the Seer, now pacified, seems to talk with a language that is not too Sibylline. And then, in the circularity of time, Giorgio de Chirico, a human being that is all too human, can return to the limelight for the definitive ‘recognition’”.⁹

The works that well represent the feeling of Neometaphysical Art are those in which de Chirico returned to his illustrations for Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (fig. 6), in which the sun shines once again on the easel in his studio, while the black sun of youthful melancholy sets on the horizon of a landscape of ruins, probably in a further memory of the Greece of his infancy. Thus, in the 1973, *Sun on the Easel* (fig. 7), in the foreground we find the stage that separates the space of the work from that of the spectators and planks that blend the stage itself into the deck of the ship, the packet-boat that in the artist’s writings symbolises the perennial Argonautic journey of the discoveries of his Metaphysical Art.

“In the 1930 etchings de Chirico illustrated Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* with wonderful freedom of stroke”, Calvesi writes, “representing the solar disk several times with a clear reference to the ‘sunniness’ of the poet himself and to his very name, which bears the impress of the sun god Apollo [...]”. In *Narrate uomini la vostra storia* [Men tell your story, 1942] Savinio was to evoke Apollinaire and his hermetic culture, attributing to him, with a new allusion to ‘sunniness’, that virtue that the ancient followers of the occult sciences “tried to resolve through ‘solar dust’, that is to say the virtue of seeing ‘the invisible, the landscapes of the air’”.¹⁰ This

9 M. Fagiolo Dell’Arco, *Giorgio de Chirico. Gli anni Trenta*, Skira, Milan, 1995, p. 224.

10 M. Calvesi, *Immagini e testi*, in *Giorgio de Chirico: Pictor Optimus*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi, M. G. Tolomeo Speranza and F. Benzi, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, Edizioni Carte Segrete, Rome 1992, pp. 292-293.



fig. 8 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910



fig. 9 G. de Chirico, *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon*, 1910

was a virtue that Apollinaire himself, it would seem, boasted he possessed.

In his Neometaphysical period, de Chirico returned in different works to his illustrations for *Calligrammes* and it is not to be excluded that among the different references there may be an allusion to Apollinaire himself, “the revenant... the poet friend that defended me in a foreign land and that I will never see again”,¹¹ as the painter wrote in his touching recollection of the great poet in 1918.

“During the neometaphysical period”, Katherine Robinson writes, “the artist captures the heart of those illustrations – *The Sun on the Easel* – in the colour and body of paint. Fire, the principal generator of all things, leaves its place in the centre of the universe and settles itself into the middle of the artist’s studio. Art, like Fire, is the element of transformation”.¹²

The words of the splendid memory-filled obituary de Chirico wrote for Apollinaire help us instead to understand how de Chirico imagined finding his friend again after death, precisely as a “revenant”, and how he celebrated with precise hermetic metaphors his friend’s return: “the curtain opens and a painting with marvellous tenderness forms in silence by itself”; “as under the bright ray of a magic lantern, there is drawn on the wall the fatal rectangle of a green sky and on that sky once again the profile of the sad centurion bends forward...” of Apollinaire the *revenant*, perhaps doubly alluded to in the black sun on the horizon and in the sun that shines in the piazzas and in Neometaphysical Interiors.

Hence the gold of conquest and the sun “setting” on the easel illuminates with its internal light de Chirico’s painting in its entirety during his last years, a hermetic sign of an almost ascetic state of beatitude that seems to illustrate what Schopenhauer theorised in the final chapter of *World as Will and Representation*. Besides, it was precisely Apollinaire who wrote that de Chirico’s enigmas “would gain by being presented with brighter colours”.¹³ Neometaphysical Art, inundated with new brightness as a splendid reflection of the Eternal Return, throws new light backwards on the curve of time on the *Pictor Optimus*’ work in its entirety.

After years of suspension between the feeling, often an anguishing one, of departure and the stasis of abandonment and the desire to return, de Chirico tears open the veil of Maya of which Schopenhauer speaks and opens the Oracle’s curtain upon his own personal representation that goes beyond illusion. The Oracle’s

11 G. de Chirico, *Guillaume Apollinaire*, in “Ars Nova”, 1918, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...* cit., p. 666.

12 K. Robinson, *Metaphysics below Zero*, in *Nature According to de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue edited by A. Bonito Oliva, Sole24Ore, Milan 2010, p. 199.

13 G. Apollinaire, in “L’Intransigeant”, Paris 9 October 1913.

curtain, which appears in *The Enigma of the Oracle* and *The Enigma of an Autumn Afternoon* (figs. 8, 9), the first metaphysical works painted in 1910, often recurs in neometaphysical works. Fabio Benzi, speaking of the curtains seen in de Chirico's early Metaphysical Art rightly observes that: "The curtains are those found in Greek orthodox churches that divide the holy place from that of the worshippers, thus hiding the 'presence' of god; their opening thus represents, as we have seen, a kind of 'unveiling of the enigma' and of revelation".¹⁴

In 1941, in his text, *Why I illustrated the Apocalypse*, de Chirico wrote: "Understand who may, but such is my nature. And if those who do not understand are many, it is not my fault; it is the fault of futile and distracted men who do not know how to look inside the work of the creators. They do not know that to understand certain mysteries it is necessary to change one's approach; frontal attacks are a vain waste of energy. They do not know that to understand certain exceptional creations of the human spirit one must start searching from behind the work. Never look pointedly at the surface in hope of advancing into the depth. One must start from the side, from behind, in order to gain the surface and the front of the stage".¹⁵

De Chirico therefore gives us precious clues: the artist is he who is able to open the mysterious curtains (the curtain of the Oracle and the Veil of Maya) to reveal, or precisely "to unveil", the Heraclitean demon that is hidden deep down in every being and every thing, by throwing it onto the scene of the painting. The painter tears the veil of phenomenon, the "scenic" illusion of representation and shows us the metaphysical nucleus of the All.

Indeed, in 1927 de Chirico wrote: "In the vast world of painting today where surprise and astonishment reign sovereign, and where the most enigmatic feelings mingle with the most troubling emotions, in this world, I say, victory will always go to those that best know how to discover it and draw it out of its mysterious scenes, to cast it on the scene of the tableau, the demon that lurks in the depths of all being and all things".¹⁶

¹⁴ F. Benzi. *I luochi di de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de Chirico: Pictor Optimus*, cit., p. 49.



fig. 10 G. de Chirico, *Amphion*, 1942 (sketch for lateral stage wings)



fig. 11 G. de Chirico, *The Door opening on the Champs-Elysées*, 1938 (sketch for *Le Minotaure*)

¹⁵ G. de Chirico, *Perché ho illustrato l'Apocalisse*, "Stile", Milan January 1941.

¹⁶ G. de Chirico, *Préface [F. de Pisis]*, catalogue introduction to de Pisis' second solo show in Paris, Galleria Au Sacre du Printemps, April-May 1927; now in *Scritti/I*, pp. 817-818.

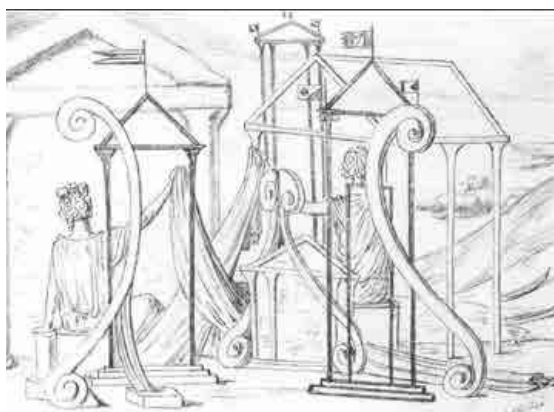


fig. 12 G. de Chirico, *Vestals with Little Temples on the Seashore*, fig. 13 G. de Chirico, *Knights and Sibyls on the Seashore*, 1936 late 1930s

De Chirico also clarifies in a 1942 essay: “An invented painting has a spiritual value. It is a painting that the artist makes after a revelation occurs. Someone opened the heavy, thick curtain that surrounds our earth and separates it from the universe. The curtain was opened only slightly and for a brief instant. But this sufficed for a man to have a very strong, surprising vision of a world that is beyond our limited knowledge, of a world distant from our small, familiar earth. This moment of revelation the artist had is a moment in which he managed to see something that is invisible to others; it is the moment in which he was able to see a world that exists outside the conception of thought and of human reason”.¹⁷

In this context one can understand the frequent presence of mysterious “volute” that populate neometaphysical works and how “the volutes that seem to be dismounted from Apollo’s lyre or from a Baroque scenery, and insistently intervene to create a framing that can suggest the theatre, the proscenium, the new value of the ‘fiction’; they almost seem like large quotation marks placed around de Chirico’s self-citations”.¹⁸

It is not by chance that we find those same volutes in theatre scenery de Chirico designed in the 1940s, like two curtain wings, as seen in the sketch for *Anfone* (1942 theatre stage wing [fig. 10]), in the revealing *The Door opening on the Champs-Élysées* (1938 sketch for *Le Minotaure* [fig. 11]) and in the 1938 sketch *Vestals with Little Temples on the Seashore* (fig. 12) in which, volutes replace the curtains that hide the divine mystery of the Oracle in the 1936 tempera with *Knights and Sibyls on the Seashore* (fig. 13). The volutes found in Neometaphysical Art can therefore allude to the opening of the curtain of the Oracle and the curtain open on the world, thanks to the revelation that touched the artist and his painting, as happens for instance in a 1968 painting, *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (fig. 14), where Oedipus seems precisely to tear open the veil of the Sphinx placed at the centre of the volutes, and the artist-seer thus opens the curtain and once more reveals the secret demon hidden in the heart of the enigmas of the world, of art and of Oedipus’ Sphinx.

The Knight of Shadow

Among the works of the neometaphysical period, the 1968 *Return of Ulysses* is not the only painting in which de Chirico reprises with variations paintings that he had done many years before. His recreation of the

17 G. de Chirico, *Discorso sulla materia pittorica*, in “Il Corriere Padano”, Ferrara, 5 April 1942; republished signed “Isabella Far” in *Commedia dell’arte moderna*, Traguardi-Nuove Edizioni Italiane, Rome 1945; English translation, *A Discourse on the Material Substance of Paint*, in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico” n. 5/6, 2006, pp. 541-547.

18 M. Calvesi, *La “nuova” Metafisica*, in *De Chirico. La nuova Metafisica*, cit., p. 17.

past with new elements links him to many of the preceding decades, as, for instance, the 1923 *Hector and Andromache* (fig. 15), redone with variants in the 1974 painting *Cry of Love* (fig. 16) and *The Prodigal Son* drawn in 1917 (fig. 17), then painted in 1922 (fig. 36) and again reprised with variants in 1923-1924 and in 1975 (fig. 18).

In *Hector and Andromache* and *The Prodigal Son*, de Chirico paradoxically represents in a very similar way the image of separation and the return home, the leave-taking and embrace of the husband and wife that can never happen again, and that of the Father welcoming his son who went away. Parting and meeting again, separation and return, have the same imagery for de Chirico here; they seem to be produced from a single original matrix from which two opposite meanings of the image find conciliation in the circularity of de Chirico's vision, in which everything seems to coincide in the final dimension of a gaze illuminated by eternity.

Thus the painter has husband and wife meet again over and above the Homeric narration. Hector, after millennia of battles and deaths, finally returns home and finds once again the embrace of his wife beyond the gateway of the afterlife. In this way de Chirico seems to overcome once more the anguishing feeling of fate that



fig. 15 G. de Chirico,
Hector and Andromaca, 1923



fig. 14 G. de Chirico. *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, 1968,
 Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

weighs on man's life and that the artist-oracle perceives sooner and more fully than others. It is the weight of that fate that governs the lives of human beings, as precisely Hector recalls in taking his leave from Andromache in the Sixth Book of the *Iliad*. We are reminded that nobody, good or bad, escapes his or her own destiny.

Thus in de Chirico's antechamber, 60 years after the poem in prose *The Weary Archangel*, there is still a crowd of revenants, because all of the painter's Neometaphysical Art is *revenant*. He recreates this antechamber after many years of silence, and other revenants return such as Hector and Andromache, the Prodigal Son and his father, Ulysses, the knight errant that returns to his ancestral castle, and Clytemnestra pursuing Orestes, sometimes no longer present in flesh and blood but as shadows that have re-emerged from the darkness of Hades. Apollinaire himself, met beyond the terrestrial dimension on the curve of time, was already a shadow at the time of his prophetic portrait and turned into a shadow-revenant in de Chirico's 1918 recollection (fig. 19). Apollinaire's shadowed profile and his "serious melancholy of a Roman centurion, intent on crossing bridges of boats cast along conquered lands, away from the comforting warmth

of his *focus* and from the *jugera* of his ploughed land”,¹⁹ also make us imagine the contoured shadows that fight on a bridge in a 1969 neometaphysical painting, *Battle on a Bridge* as revenant Roman soldiers (fig. 20). Not by chance, like a ghostly shadow, or, perhaps better, a contoured shadow from Hades, a knight errant, an adventurer (yet another identification of the artist himself from 1923 on), returns to the ancestral castle, as did a knight in flesh and blood in a painting of his in the 1940s.

As de Chirico had written in 1923 in *Pro Technica Oratio*, the journey of the knight errant is the journey of the artist himself into the unknown and mysterious lands of painting: “that painter (who) will succeed in creating beautiful painterly matter, who also shows spirit and lyrical and romantic soul in his representations; I mean romantic in the vaster and better sense, which would be that of a man driven by inclination to discovery and search; of the man that into the vast, mysterious and magic world of painting brings the same love, the same faith, the same curiosity, the same ever-vibrating and ever-new emotion, and especially the same courage, that the knight errant of the Middle Ages took in his long journey across unknown regions and countries fraught with dangers and surprises”.²⁰

Like a shadow, de Chirico makes his journey and returns towards the ancestral home, like the *Tired Orpheus-troubadour* painted in 1970 (fig. 21), a seer-poet and at the same time a troubadour, who rests in a metaphysical piazza backstage of a theatrical and oracular curtain, while the ghost of the ancestral castle (perhaps the one in Urbino of his beloved Raphael?) shines through from a veronese green sky. In a photograph taken of the artist with the painting in his studio in the 1970s (fig. 22), we can see that the castle was originally painted into the scene and then covered up with a fine veiling that purposely allows the “spectral” image of the fortification.

One seems to hear the artist’s youthful words: “What is nobler, more sublime than to feel the true beauty of death which comes as a reward to the thinker, tired and weary of the long path he travelled during the φενόμενον of his existence, who at last wishes to forget once and for all what he has learned. There are few men



fig. 16 G. de Chirico, *Cry of Love*, 1974
Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 17 G. de Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*,
1917



fig. 18 G. de Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*
1975, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de
Chirico, Rome

19 G. de Chirico, *Guillaume Apollinaire*, cit., p. 663.

20 G. de Chirico, *Pro Technica Oratio*, in “La Bilancia”, March-April 1923; now in *G. de Chirico, Scritti.1....* cit., p. 799.



fig. 19 G. de Chirico, *Portrait of Guillaume Apollinaire*, 1914, Centre Pompidou, Paris



fig. 20 G. de Chirico, *Battle on a Bridge*, 1969, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 21 G. de Chirico, *Orpheus the Tired Troubadour* 1970, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

who have felt the greatness of death, I do not say the depth because there is none. Allow me here to quote this poem of the Italian poet Pandolfo. It will add melancholic grandeur to what I have just said:

Hymn to the death of Pandolfo Collenuccio

As a pilgrim in his vague wandering tired / Of his long and fatiguing journeys / Through rugged and wild places, / Already bent through age and white-haired / To his sweet native shelter/ Sighing hastens, remembering / His father's bones and his first age / Tender pity for himself / He feels, and his troubled limbs / He desires to rest in the place where he was born / And he liked good living: / Thus I, that go towards worse years line / Enwrapped in dream, in smoke, in vanity / To you I address my prayers, *Singular refuge that brings peace / To the human journey, o Sacred death*".²¹

Return to the Ancestral Castle (fig. 23), of which another very similar version exists (both painted in 1969), appears as a variation on the famous fresco of *Guidoriccio da Fogliano* by Simone Martini and is linked to de Chirico's interest in 14th century Italian painting in his early metaphysical period. Thus the black shadow rides toward the "sweet native shelter", at the end of a life seen, in a Schopenhauerian way, as a phenomenon, pure



fig. 22 Giorgio de Chirico in his studio with *Orpheus the Tired Troubadour*, 1970, photograph, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

21 G. de Chirico, *Éluard-Picasso Manuscripts*, in G. de Chirico *Scritti/1...* cit., pp. 605-606.



fig. 23 G. de Chirico, *Return to the Ancestral Castle*, 1969, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

representation that death allows the tired knight-thinker to overcome, like the tired Troubadour-Orpheus that appears in front of the wide open curtain of that revelation that rends the veil of Maya and opens the Oracles' curtain behind which the metaphysical demon hides.

The knight, "tired of his long and fatiguing journeys remembers his father's bones and his first age", and hastens towards the native shelter, and like a shadow from Hades returning rides towards the meeting with the father lost in infancy. The return of the knight therefore looks forward to the return of the Prodigal Son, in a perspective that has however changed over the years: de Chirico no longer sees as false the idea of the hereafter and eternal life, and indeed, having become once again a believer, sees his own Metaphysical Art as a bridge between our world and the hereafter: "Art was born from this desire of representing God in the most ideal and perfect way, and true art is indeed a particle of the Divine Spirit that lives among us. [...] A great artist is chosen in

order for Universal and Divine Talent to manifest itself in an ideal form that is comprehensible to humanity. It is from Divine Talent, which one could also call Cosmic that inspiration reaches the artist. [...] Great art, through which Universal Talent manifests itself to mankind, is Creation's highest expression for it is both spiritual and material. Art is composed of concrete and abstract elements and is equally bound to the physical and metaphysical worlds, which means that it is the most complete creation known to us. Art is a bridge



fig. 24 G. de Chirico, *Remorse of Orestes*, 1969, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 25 G. de Chirico, *Orestes and Electra*, 1975, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 26 G. de Chirico, *Metaphysical Figures*, 1918

uniting our world to a world beyond. Our thoughts, well equipped for a voyage into that dangerous world can embark in full security and venture far as the way of return is assured by the stability of the bridge".²²

22 G. de Chirico, *Il signor Dudron*, novel published posthumously by Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico on occasion of the



fig. 27 G. de Chirico, *Electra the Consolatrix*, 1968 ca. (signed "1957"), Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome



fig. 28 G. de Chirico, *The Revenant* 1917-1918, Centre Pompidou, Paris

in an armchair with a similar iconography, as we will see, to a number of versions of *The Prodigal Son* that de Chirico painted during the same period.

For this reason, perhaps, many years afterwards, the features of the 1918 *Revenant* (fig 28) reappear in the depiction of Orestes in the neometaphysical painting *Orestes and Electra* (fig. 29), where the tragic hero in a dressing-gown is consoled by his sister, a consolation that has special meaning for the

It is probably not by chance that the knight returning to the ancestral castle is precisely on a bridge, perhaps precisely that bridge of art that unites the two worlds and makes it possible to announce the definitive transit towards the hereafter: the shadow of the knight returns to the Father's home.

The Ghosts and Consolations of Orestes

In a painting of 1969, a disquieting black shadow presents itself to a character with a human body and mannequin head immersed in a deep state of prostration. It is thus that de Chirico represents *The Remorse of Orestes* (fig. 24): through the dark countenance of a shadow that becomes a ghost. Agamemnon's son is tormented by the revenant presence of the spectre of his mother Clytemnestra and shows the painter's renewed and explicit relationship with Greek tragedy and with the feeling of prophecy and ineluctable fate. Thus in the neometaphysical period, the "tragic" works full of lyricism devoted to Orestes multiply and are indeed crowded with revenants and, of no coincidence, the imagery of a watercolour depicting *Orestes and Electra*, 1975 (fig. 25), once more is directly taken from the 1917 drawing *Metaphysical Figures*, 1918 (fig. 26) with the sepulchral door of the revenants that closes the perspective of the room, a door that was already emblematically present in the painting *Electra the Consolatrix* (1968 ca. [fig. 27]) in

which Electra consoles Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting

Orestes who is sitting



fig. 29 G. de Chirico, *Orestes and Electra*, 1974 ca., (signed "1948"), Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

20th anniversary of the artist's death, Le Lettere, Florence 1998. The passages cited from the novel are actually quotes from two theoretical texts by the artist, *Considerations on Modern Painting* ("Stile", Milan January 1942) and *Form in Art and Nature* ("L'Illustrazione Italiana", Milan March 1943), republished in 1945 signed "Isabella Far" in *La Commedia...* cit., both of which are published for the first time in English in this periodical.

transformed and more peaceful state of mind of the artist in the last years of his life.

The stage, recurrent in the neometaphysical painting, thus not by chance evokes the words of de Chirico's tragic stage: "The primitive poet, Homer for instance, who sings of infinite spaces, the high-sounding sea, the abyss of the sky fertile with the gods, the forests and the great open lands still free from the geometrization of construction, this poet, I say, is less advanced in lyrical profundity than the dramatic author who within the limited, enclosed spaces of a stage moves a few characters of a tragedy, narrowly bound by the lines of construction. Once set free, the same kind of images sung by the primitive poet appear with greater depth and more astonishing lyricism".²³

The Orestes in the *Pictor Optimus*' paintings and written work clearly shows de Chirico's way of mixing irony and tragedy, the archaic origins and the present, myth and daily life, as already occurred in a 1927 text of his, in which "Orestes persecuted by the Furies" could have found refuge "in the islet formed by furniture displayed on the pavement" and then "sink into an armchair in their midst, he would suddenly find himself sheltered from all persecution of gods and men, where he could contemplate the thundering of clouds or the wrath of an unleashed mob as a Sunday stroller in the zoo contemplates the cruel tiger gnawing angrily and in vain at the bars of his cage. [...] The furniture in the street is, as I said, the temple into which Orestes flees. On the threshold of these temples the Furies come powerlessly to a halt and in the boredom of the wait eventually fall asleep snoring".²⁴

However, on this important track we can also graft another interesting clue: de Chirico's interest in writer Thomas de Quincey is well-known. In an interview with Berenice, that took place during the Neometaphysical Art period, de Chirico once again recommended reading the masterpiece *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, and even declared: "For example, Baudelaire does not interest me. I believe his most important endeavor, which is indeed not a small one at all, is that of introducing de Quincey to the French".²⁵

Even if de Chirico wrote in his 1919 essay, *On Metaphysical Art*: "we avoid looking to the dream as a source of creativity. Thomas de Quincey's methods do not interest us", over the course of the years he seems to have found in the images and visionary writing of the English author a number of significant cues, which also seem to have even been important for *Hebdomeros*.

Indeed, de Chirico wrote: "Thomas de Quincey, Nietzsche and Heine have discovered the real significance of certain seasons of the year. De Quincey felt and expressed the funereal horror of summer so profoundly in the memories of childhood when he spoke of the profound impression the sight of a dead child in a room made upon him, while outside shone all the inexorable heat of a summer day and a terrible and mysterious wind was billowing the window curtains".²⁶

In another passage de Chirico also seems to link his Roman visions of legionaries and gladiators to de Quincey: "The profundity and metaphysical sense in Klinger's vision can be compared in literature to a

23 G. de Chirico, *Il senso architettonico nella pittura antica*, in "Valori Plastici", III, 5-6, May-June 1920; English translation, *On Architectural Sense In Classical Painting*, in this periodical.

24 G. de Chirico, *Statues, Meubles et Généraux*, in "Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne", n. 38, Paris October 1927; English translation, *Statues, Furniture and Generals*, in *Giorgio de Chirico: The Enigma of the World*, exhibition catalogue edited by F. Benzi, Pera Museum, Suna and Inan Kiraç Foundation, Istanbul 2016, pp. 147-149.

25 Berenice, *Incontro con Giorgio de Chirico*, edited by C. Siniscalco, Edizioni La Baitta, Matera-Ferrara, 1985, pp. 131-132.

26 The quotes on de Quincy cited are found in *Sull'arte metafisica* in "Valori Plastici", I 4-5, April-May 1919; G. de Chirico, *Gustave Courbet*, in "Rivista di Firenze", I, 7, November 1924; preface to the volume *Courbet* published by "Valori Plastici" in French and English in 1925; English translations of both essays are published in this periodical.

recount told by Thomas de Quincey about a very strange dream he had. He relates that he found himself in the hall of a brilliantly illuminated palace at a festival where many fine gentlemen and ladies were dancing; suddenly a mysterious voice shouted: ‘*Consul Romanus!*’ and the Consul appeared with his legions; he clapped his hands thrice and at this signal all the dancers vanished, whereas insignias and banners were raised around the Consul and the legion burst forth with a loud ‘Hurrah!’. Few men are capable of creating and expressing with clarity similar imaginings”.²⁷

The painter also evokes a vision of de Quincey in his *Memoirs* that he seems to have remembered from some of his written work: “Often, late at night, the young Thomas de Quincey, would walk with Ann along the banks of the Thames, as Socrates would walk with Aspasia along the banks of the Ilissus, talking of many lofty things concerning the mind and human sentiments. But one day he could no longer find Ann, nor did he succeed afterwards in learning anything about her. But he always remembered her as a grownup and even when he was old, and always saw her in his dreams, while in his *Confessions* he described this poetic and profound vision: “The domes and cupolas of a great city were vaguely visible on the horizon. And not far from me, upon a stone, shaded by Judean palms, there sat a woman in meditation and prayer. It was – Ann!””.²⁸

Ann, the prostitute that saved the English writer in his adolescence, seems to have struck the artist precisely because of her nature as a revenant that re-emerges from the darkness of time, and all his quotations from de Quincey are taken from the masterpiece *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. De Chirico could also have found some correspondence between his experiences and those of the writer, who, like him, suffered from gastric pains, to get relief from which he also took laudanum, an opiate analgesic, just as Chirico himself declared he did (though certainly taking much smaller doses) in his *Memoirs*: “For example, stomach cramps are very effectively treated by drops of laudanum drunk with a little water”.²⁹

Over and above these simple coincidences, a passage in de Quincey’s *Confessions*, which as we have seen were well-known to Chirico, seems to be particularly important for his works devoted to Orestes, for his visions of spectres for the consolations that saved him from ghosts more horrible than those that persecuted Orestes’ pallet: “There it was that for years I was persecuted by visions as ugly, and as ghastly phantoms, as ever haunted the couch of an Orestes; and in this unhappier than he, – that sleep, which comes to all as a respite and a restoration, and to him especially as a blessed balm for his wounded heart and his haunted brain, visited me as my bitterest scourge. Thus blind was I in my desires; yet, if a veil interposes between the dim-sightedness of man and his future calamities, the same veil hides from him their alleviations; and a grief which had not been feared is met by consolations which had not been hoped. I, therefore, who participated, as it were, in the troubles of Orestes (excepting only in his agitated conscience), participated no less in all his supports; my Eumenides, like his, were at my bed-feet, and stared in upon me through the curtains; but, watching by my pillow, or defrauding herself of sleep to bear me company through the heavy watches of the night, sat my Electra; for thou, beloved M., dear companion of my later years, thou wast my Electra! and neither in nobility of mind nor in long-suffering affection wouldst permit that a Grecian sister should excel an English wife. [...] Nor even when thy own peaceful slumbers had by long sympathy become infected with the spectacle of

27 G. de Chirico, *Max Klinger*, in “Il Convegno”, I, 10, 1920; English translation in this periodical. For the passage quoted by de Chirico, see T. de Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*; first edition, “London Magazine”, London 1821; edition consulted, Ticknor and Fields, Boston 1868, p. 113.

28 G. de Chirico, *Memorie della mia vita*, Astrolabio, Rome, 1945; II ed. Rizzoli, Milan 1962; English translation *The Memoirs of Giorgio de Chirico*, Peter Owen, London 1971, p. 169. For the passage quoted by de Chirico, see T. de Quincey, see *Confessions...*, cit., p.122.

29 G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...*, cit., p. 171.



fig. 30 G. de Chirico, *Pylades restraining Orestes*, 1973, watercolour, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

by the Furies of melancholy, and a victim of Fate and the prophecy of Delphi, in a very similar vision to that traced out by de Quincey: “I refer to the early scenes of the *Orestes*, one of the most beautiful exhibitions of the domestic affections which even the dramas of Euripides can furnish. To the English reader, it may be necessary to say, that the situation at the opening of the drama is that of a brother attended only by his sister during the demoniacal possession of a suffering conscience (or, in the mythology of the play, haunted by the furies), and in circumstances of immediate danger from enemies, and of desertion or cold regard from nominal friends”.³¹

In Neometaphysical Art, together with his sister Electra, it is also his trusted friend Pylades that consoles Orestes persecuted by the Erinyes: therefore if indeed de Chirico and Savinio, in addition to identifying one another as Castor and Pollux and the Argonauts, also identified one another as Orestes and Pylades,³² in a 1973 watercolour (fig. 30), it is perhaps Savinio revenant on the stage of dream that consoles de Chirico-Orestes persecuted by the Furies, in a vision similar to that described by de Chirico himself, in a 1970s variant of his novel *Dudron*: “he fled like an Orestes chased by the Erinys, desperately looking for refuge in the temple where faithful Pylades awaits him”.³³

30 T. de Quincey, *Confessions...* cit., pp. 61-62.

31 *Ibidem*, p. 62.

32 “The two brothers [de Chirico e Savinio] identify at times [...] with the Argonauts [...] and with Orestes and Pilade (in company of the Furies), and especially with the Dioscuri”, M. Fagiolo Dell’Arco, *Alberto Savinio*, Fabbri Editore, Milan 1989, p. 16.

33 Variation of the novel *Il Signor Dudron*, datable to the 1960s, published in *Giorgio de Chirico. Dalla Metafisica alla “Metafisica”*, exhibition catalogue edited by V. Sgarbi, Pinacoteca Provinciale, Potenza, Marsilio, Venice 2002; English translation in “Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico”, n. 5/6, 2006, pp. 564-566.

The embrace between Orestes and Pylades can therefore seem the prelude to the one de Chirico himself, in his *Memoirs*, hoped for with his brother Savinio after death and beyond time, in a reconciled eternal and definitive consolation: “You were leaving for the other shore, leaving me alive at the frontier of Time and I do not know what kind of labyrinth the streets constitute, on the other side of your wall. In this adventure of life, as long as I live, I shall continue to work as well as I possibly can and do what I know I should do, and when the hour of my destiny strikes, it is there, very far away, or perhaps very near, it is there, beyond all time and space it is there, when all anchors have been weighed, it is there in the ideal world, that I shall meet you and say to you, ‘Brother, here I am!’”³⁴

In 1943, Savinio, speaking of the meeting his brother in death after their separation in life, had written: “it is there that my brother and I will find one another again as we were 20 years ago, when nothing yet divided us, and the two of us had one mind”.³⁵

The Prodigal Son at the Frontiers of Time

In the painting of his last decade, de Chirico thus opens the curtain on his studio crowded with the characters of his long journey in art, with the protagonists of that “continual Metaphysical Art”³⁶ in which over time there have appeared gladiators and swimmers, warriors and vestals, trophies and mannequins, the ghostly shadow of Leonida rising gigantic from Thermopylae, Hector and Andromache, Oedipus and the Sphinx, as well as Antigone consoling her father, in a procession of characters and visions that seems to give new life to the imagination of an artist who evokes all his ghosts.

The painter thus stages once again his apparitions and his enigmas with a power similar to the innocent power of a child and one can think back on what he wrote many years before, on the artist touched by revelation that, once more, suddenly opens the curtain of the world: “Revelation is something that appears suddenly to an artist, as if one had drawn a curtain, opened a door; which brings him great joy, great happiness, an almost physical pleasure, and drives him to work. He is surprised and pleased like a child someone has given a toy. This resemblance between the joy of the artist touched by revelation and that of the child surprised by a gift, is due, I think, to the fact that both are pure; the latter because of the innocence of the being that receives it, the former because he is purified in the material and moral effort of creation”.³⁷

In a not very dissimilar way, Thomas de Quincey set his power over his own visions alongside the power of revelation gifted to children able to imagine all kinds of ghosts in the dark: “Many children, perhaps most, have a power of painting, as it were, upon the darkness, all sorts of phantoms: in some that power is simply a mechanic affection of the eye; others have a voluntary or semi-voluntary power to dismiss or summon them; or, as a child once said to me, when I questioned him on this matter, ‘I can tell them to go, and they go; but sometimes they come when I don’t tell them to come’. Whereupon I told him that he had almost as unlimited a command over apparitions as a Roman centurion over his soldiers. In the middle of 1817, I think it was, that this faculty became positively distressing to me: at night, when I lay awake in bed, vast processions passed along in mournful pomp; friezes of never-ending stories, that to my feelings were as sad and solemn as if they

34 G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...* cit., p. 221.

35 A. Savinio, *Casa “La vita”*, I ed. Adelphi, Milan 1943, p. 15.

36 See M. Calvesi, *Giorgio de Chirico e la “Metafisica Continua”* in *Giorgio de Chirico. La “Metafisica Continua”*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi, Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo 2008, pp. 25-29.

37 G. de Chirico, *Quelques perspectives sur mon art*, in “L’Europe Central”, Prague April 1935, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...* cit., pp. 841-842.



fig. 31 G. de Chirico, *The Dream of Achilles*, 1927

fig. 32 G. de Chirico, *Apparition*, 1917

were stories drawn from times before (Oedipus or Priam, before Tyre, before Memphis. And, at the same time, a corresponding change took place in my dreams; a theatre seemed suddenly opened and lighted up within my brain, which presented, nightly, spectacles of more than earthly splendour”.³⁸

With an analogous visionary capacity de Chirico had spoken, as we have seen, of the apparitions of revenants, the revenants in the antechamber of his room still hidden by a lowered curtain. In a passage full of evocations linked to Schopenhauer, a philosopher de Chirico loved through to his old age, he writes: “It seems to me that the surprise, the troubled astonishment that certain works of genius give us is due to a momentary cessation in us of life or, better, of the logical rhythm of the universe. [...] the strange metaphysical appearance which people take on, when we notice them, is due, I think, to the fact that our senses, our cerebral faculties, under the shock of surprise loose the thread of human logic, of that logic to which we are used to since childhood; or rather we ‘forget’, we loose our memory, life comes to a halt and in this cessation of the vital rhythm of the universe the figures we see, even if not changing form materially, present themselves to us under a spectral aspect”.³⁹

Schopenhauer himself, in his *Essay on the Vision of the Spirits*, a text well-known to de Chirico, sets the prophetic dream alongside the vision of spirits in a dimension that annuls time: “According to this, we must, therefore, first attribute prophetic dreams to the fact that in deep sleep dreaming is enhanced to a somnambulist clairvoyance [...]. The objective world is a mere phenomenon of the brain. For the order and conformity to law thereof which are based on space, time, and causality (as brain-functions), are to some extent set aside in somnambulist clairvoyance. Thus in consequence of the Kantian doctrine of the ideality of space and time, we see that the thing-in-itself, that which alone is the truly real in all phenomena as being free from those two forms of the intellect, knows no distinction between near and remote, between present, past, and future [...]. For if time is not a determination of the real nature of things, then, in respect thereof, before and after are without meaning; accordingly, it must be possible for an event to be known just as well before it

38 T. de Quincey, *cit.*, pp. 109-110.

39 G. de Chirico, *Raffaello Sanzio*, in “Il Convegno”, Milan-Rome, a. I, n. 3, April 1920; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...* *cit.*, p. 365; English translation in this periodical.



fig. 33 G. de Chirico, *The Child's Brain (The Revenant)*, 1914, Moderna Museet, Stockholm



fig. 34 G. de Chirico, *The Shadow of Brutus*, 1924 ca.

has happened as after. The art of soothsaying, whether in the dream, somnambulistic prophetic vision, second sight, or anything else, consists only in discovering the path to the freedom of knowledge from the condition of time [...]. Animal magnetism, sympathetic cures, magic, second sight, dreaming the real, spirit seeing, and visions of all kinds are kindred phenomena, branches of one stem. They afford certain and irrefutable proof of a nexus of entities that rests on an order of things entirely different from nature. For her foundation nature has the laws of space, time, and causality, whereas that other order is more deep-seated, original, and immediate. Therefore the first and most universal (because purely formal) laws of nature are not applicable to it".⁴⁰

Dream and prophecy, qualities of the artist-seer, were also defined by de Chirico, in the previously quoted letter to Guillaume Apollinaire, precisely in a vision linked to Heraclitus and Nietzsche's Eternal Return, where time is annulled: "The Ephesian teaches us that time does not exist and that on the great curve of eternity the past is the same as the future. This might be what the Romans meant with their image of Janus, the god with two faces; and every night in dream, in the deepest hours of rest, the past and future appear to us as equal, memory blends with prophecy in a mysterious union".⁴¹

With regard to dream and the shadow of a ghostly revenant, it should be noted that in 1927 de Chirico had already painted *The Dream of Achilles* (fig. 31), a painting in which the spectre of Patroclus in the form of a white shape appears to Achilles in an oneiric and metaphysical room with the half-open door of the *revenants*. It is not by chance, moreover, that the structure of this painting, with the spectre standing and Achilles kneeling, reprises that of the drawing *The Apparition* (1917 [fig. 32]) and the painting *The Revenant* (1917-1918), where a mannequin kneels in front of the man-column with closed eyes, a work that Fagiolo dell'Arco also interpreted as a Prodigal Son and one in which a man with moustache and closed eyes has the

40 A. Schopenhauer, *Essay on Spirit Seeing and Everything Connected Therewith*, in *Parerga e Paralipomena* (1 ed. *Parerga und Paralipomena: kleine philosophische Schriften*, Druck und Verlag von A. W. Hayn, Berlin 1851), vol. I, translated by E. F. J. Payne, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1974, pp. 254, 263-265.

41 G. de Chirico, letter to G. Apollinaire, *cit.*

features of *The Philosopher-poet* of 1918.⁴² Another very similar character is the protagonist of the painting known as *The Child's Brain* (fig. 33), although de Chirico reveals its true title and meaning in a 1924 letter to Gala Éluard: "I do not hide the fact that I do not like the title *The Child's Brain*; to me, this painting is entitled *The Revenant* and that is what it is: *the Revenant*".⁴³

Thus in the same way, therefore, *The Philosopher* of 1924 (the iconography of which evidently derives from *The Revenant* (*The Child's Brain*)⁴⁴ and the mannequin with toga in the 1917 drawing *Apparition*, which shows very similar imagery to the *Revenant* and to the *Dream of Achilles*, could then be real revenants.

It must also not be forgotten that Fagiolo dell'Arco rightly set *The Dream of Achilles* alongside the 1924 ca. painting *The Shadow of Brutus* (fig. 34) and, not by chance, a revenant similar to that of Patroclus (the two figures are both very probably inspired by the "original" figures on the vases of the Greek Geometric Period) appears in the drawing *The Ghost of Brutus* (1929 ca. [fig. 35]) showing almost identical imagery to the 1926 *Prodigal Son* (fig. 36), in which Fagiolo dell'Arco justly recognized two ghostly apparitions.⁴⁵

The painting and the drawing devoted to Brutus seem to have been inspired by the famous passages in Plutarch and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act IV, Scene III) where the evil genius (perhaps Caesar's ghost) appears to Brutus pronouncing the famous words "thou shalt see me at Philippi". It must also be remembered that Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* is quoted by de Chirico in speaking of the feeling of the premonition and terrible apparitions: "Often the presage in it was terrible like the roar of a dying god. Black clouds were to draw as close as the towers of the city. One such moment is wonderfully expressed by Shakespeare in the tragedy of *Caesar*, when he talks about the sudden and terrible appearance of the lion in the Roman sentinel".⁴⁶



fig. 35 G. de Chirico, *The Ghost of Brutus*, fig. 36 G. de Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*, 1926 ca. 1929

fig. 37 G. de Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*, 1922

42 The painting, whose whereabouts is unknown today, was reproduced in "Cronache di Attualità", Rome 15 February 1919.

43 G. de Chirico, Letter to Paul and Gala Éluard, 10 February 1924, in "Metafisica. Quaderni della Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico", n. 1/2, 2002, p. 155.

44 See M. Fagiolo dell'Arco, *The Philosopher*, 1924, information caption in *De Chirico: Gli anni Venti...*, cit., p. 78.

45 See M. Fagiolo, *Il sogno di Achille*, 1927, information caption in *De Chirico: Gli anni Venti...* cit., p. 142.

46 G. de Chirico, *Éluard Manuscripts...* cit., p. 626.

In the 1920s, the evil demon appears to Brutus in the same way as the Prodigal Son visits his melancholy father in 1926, both again “ghostly apparitions”, as Fagiolo dell’Arco noticed, of a work that in the years of de Chirico’s Neometaphysical Art was to reappear, with fundamental variations, but with new meaning.

In the Neometaphysical period de Chirico took up once again each one of his works devoted to the theme of the *Prodigal Son*, which is also central in his literary production, in a sort of ideal cycle in which father and son become true *revenants*. Having reached the limit



fig. 38 G. de Chirico, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1919

of earthly life, de Chirico seems to rewind the thread of memory and to find once again the *revenant* of his father, the man with a pained look that many years before, with words that seem to describe *The Prodigal Son* painted in 1975 (fig. 18), which reprises two works with the same title, a drawing of 1917 (fig. 17) and a 1922 painting (fig. 37), had announced: “Your blood flows over your beard that is so sweet. Man, I will cover you if you are cold. Come up there. No happiness that rolls at your feet like a crystal ball. And all the *constructions* of your mind will applaud you together. *That day* I too will applaud, sitting in the centre of the sun-filled square, near the stone warrior and the empty tub. And towards evening, when the shadow of the lighthouse on the pier will be long, when the banners beat and the white sails are round and hard as breasts swollen with love and desires, we will fall into one another’s arms and together we will weep”.⁴⁷

The memory of his father, the engineer “applauded by his own constructions”,⁴⁸ is renewed in the dreamt-of and finally enacted, in a metaphysical piazza that is reminiscent of that of the 1917 drawing, afterwards translated into painting in the neometaphysical period.

Thus if the return to his beloved father whom de Chirico lost when he was young and mourned the rest of his life, of the 1919 *Return of the Prodigal Son* (fig. 38)⁴⁹ represented the return to the Museum and the tradition of great painting, the 1975 *Prodigal Son* could represent the return to Metaphysical Art in Nietzsche’s Turin, the achievement of backward time announced many years before, where the stone father descending from his pedestal and the prophetic mannequin are found once again in an open and bright piazza, which shadows no longer loom over gravely and in which the whole perspective lengthens and is lit up with the

⁴⁷ G. de Chirico, *Paulhan Manuscripts*, in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1...* cit., p. 655.

⁴⁸ On the professional and private life of Evaristo Maria de Chirico (1841-1905), see P. Picozza, *Evaristo de Chirico*, in “Metaphysical Art - The de Chirico Journals”, n. 11/13, 2014, pp. 111-128. In particular, the resumé written by Evaristo de Chirico for his application to The Institution of Civil Engineers in London that includes the specification of the railway lines built under his direction in Italy, Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece from 1863 to 1890 (year of the application), p. 113.

⁴⁹ See M. Calvesi’s illuminating essay, *De Chirico e le metamorfosi del destino*, in *De Chirico nel centenario della nascita*, exhibition catalogue edited by M. Calvesi, Museo Correr, Venezia, A. Mondadori-De Luca, Milan-Rome 1988, pp. 9-42 and M. Fagiolo dell’Arco, *Il ritorno de figliol prodigo*, 1919, information caption in *L’opera completa di Giorgio de Chirico 1908-1924*, Milan 1984, p. 105.



fig. 39 G. de Chirico, *The Consoler*, 1929

sweet joy of the embrace, similar to that described by Luke in the evangelical parable of the Prodigal Son (15,11-32), which inspired the painter. In this context, of particular importance is the interest that de Chirico always had in Collodi's masterpiece, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, a book whose deep metaphoric value de Chirico well understood, even setting it alongside Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*: "I remember that after reading Nietzsche's immortal work *Thus Spake Zarathustra* I perceived an impression in various passages in this book that I had already experienced as a child when I read an Italian book for children entitled *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. A strange similarity reveals the depth of the work".⁵⁰

It is not by chance that Pinocchio has often been set alongside the Prodigal Son and the scene of the embrace between Pinocchio and Geppetto in the belly of the Dogfish, after the mishaps of the puppet that has abandoned his father, seems to have been echoed both in the child-mannequin and in the image of the father described by Collodi as "a little old man, all white as if he were made of snow or whipped cream",⁵¹ a ghostly figure perhaps echoed both in the stone father in the 1922 and 1975 paintings, as well as in the 1926 version and in the neometaphysical reprises of 1973 and 1974.

The different versions of the *Prodigal Son* alternate a son represented as a mannequin (in the 1919, 1922 and 1975 paintings and in the 1917 drawing) with a son represented as a young man, remodelled, as is well-known, from an ancient statue of Narcissus in the 1926 and 1973 paintings.⁵²

Calvesi rightly noticed the similarity between these works and the last lines of *Hebdomeros*, and in this context de Chirico's words indeed reveal the state of mind and the thought that animate Neometaphysical Art: "Once again all slept in immobility and silence. Suddenly Hebdomeros saw that this woman had the eyes of his father; and he *understood*. She spoke of immortality in the great starless night. 'O Hebdomeros', she said, 'I am Immortality. Nouns have their gender, or rather their sex, as you once said with much finesse, and verbs, alas, have their tenses. Have you ever thought of my death? Have you ever thought of the death of my death? Have you ever *thought of my life*? One day, O Brother...'. But she spoke no further. Seated on the trunk of a broken column, she placed a hand gently on his shoulder, and with the other she clasped the hand of the hero. Hebdomeros, his elbow on the ruin and his chin in his hand, pondered no longer. His thoughts, in the pure breath of that voice that he had heard, yielded slowly and ended by the abandoning him altogether. They surrendered to the caressing waves of unforgettable words, and on these waves they floated toward strange and unknown shores. They floated in the warmth of the setting sun, smiling in its descent toward the cerulean skies...".⁵³

50 G. de Chirico, *Éluard Manuscripts...* cit., 607.

51 C. Collodi, *Le avventure di Pinocchio. Storia di un burattino*, Libreria Editrice Felice Paggi, Florence 1881; English translation, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, M.A. Murray, 1892.

52 See E. La Rocca, *L'archeologia nell'opera di de Chirico*, in *Giorgio de Chirico 1888-1978*, exhibition catalogue edited by P. Vivarelli, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome, De Luca Editore, Rome 1981, p. 33.

53 G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, cit., pp. 141-142.

Neometaphysical Art precisely rediscovers this warmth of an autumn sun and the other paintings in which the Prodigal Son finds his father again seem to allude to the fragments of ruins that give form to the fatherly figures, that are finally consoled by the Eternal Return of the son to the blessed state of immortality, as Maurizio Calvesi wrote, finding once again “the eyes of the dead father. Like the prodigal son returning to his roots, Hebdomeros returns to a point in and beyond death”.⁵⁴

Speaking of the archetype of many neometaphysical works (fig. 39), Calvesi identified the two figures in *The Consoler* of 1929, as Hebdomeros and Immortality, “archaeologists” and new mannequins, with a positive meaning. With their breasts open and full of objects: “memory contemplates the past like a river that has raced downhill, in the hope of the future”, in figures whose “melancholy is consoled” and who look forward to the bright and “consolatory” return that occurs in Neometaphysical Art, which, with its paradoxical backward flowing river, gives form to the future on the curve of time, thus fulfilling and giving better understanding to the works of the preceding decades.⁵⁵

De Chirico depicts this scene in one of his 1972 illustrations for *Hebdomeros* entitled *The Consolatrix* (fig. 40), where Immortality rests her hand on the hero’s shoulder and turns into a paradigmatic image of his entire neometaphysical phase, warmed as it is by an autumnal sun. Besides, it is precisely in *Hebdomeros* that the return of the Prodigal Son, “the revenant”, was welcomed with great joy: “it was Hebdomeros’ friends who gave the signal; as soon as they saw him arrive, they all shouted together: ‘There he is!’, and then louder still: ‘Three cheers for the one who has come back! Three cheers for the revenant! Three cheers of the prodigal son!’”.⁵⁶

Two other 1973 and 1974 paintings (figs. 41, 42) in which the Prodigal Son once again finds his father, show an evident contamination between the imagery of the 1926 *Prodigal Son* and that of the *Consoler/Consolatrix*, but with the positions turned around: it is no longer de Chirico-Hebdomeros that is consoled, but it is the petrified father-archaeologist composed like an assemblage of ruins and fragments that receives the son’s hand sweet consoling hand on his shoulder; the hand that in 1926 weighed gigantic like guilt resting on the armchair now rests on the father’s shoulder to comfort him.

The ghostly and petrified father is thus consoled by the return of a son that in his metamorphoses becomes a mannequin, a statue-mannequin and finally a young male nude. In the 1973 *Prodigal Son*, he is placed in a room in which the half-open and dark door, which often appears in the Neometaphysical period, alludes to the door of the revenants and the half-open door that, as we have already seen, for de Chirico has a clear sepulchral value. The fact is that in these works it is not only the son that returns, but the father too is a true “revenant”: it is half-open door through which the revenants had reached de Chirico’s rooms in 1918.

The desire for the return of the father was also expressed



fig. 40 G. de Chirico, *The Consolatrix* 1972, Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, Rome

⁵⁴ M. Calvesi, *De Chirico e le metamorfosi del destino*, cit., p. 28.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁶ G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, cit., pp. 99-100.



fig. 41 G. de Chirico, *The Prodigal Son*, 1973

by Savinio in his *Tragedia dell'infanzia* [Tragedy of infancy]: “Today, father, I would not bother you any more with my ‘whys’. Calm and silent, we would enjoy the peace of soothed curiosities, of spent desires. So why don’t you return?”⁵⁷

For de Chirico, the arm on the shoulder was also connected to the memory of the father close to death, as he himself says in his *Memoirs*: “I was on my father’s left; at a certain moment he took hold of me by the shoulders and I felt the weight of his large arm. I was moved and embarrassed. I tried to understand the reason for this unexpected gesture of affection, and then my father spoke to me: ‘My life is ending, but yours is just beginning’.

We returned home without his saying anything more, my father keeping his arm on my shoulder”⁵⁸

In a luminous vision, the son consoles the father, whilst a seascape of Greece seems to allude to the land of de Chirico’s birth and where his father had died and had been buried, the original territory where the meeting perhaps takes place in a dream, as could be suggested by the crook not held in the hand by the father as in the other painting, but leaning on the wall. The crook, perhaps not by chance, in *Hebdomeros* was held by: “Mercury *oneiropump*, that is, the bringer of dreams, [...] a shepherd, holding a crook in place of his staff; he was driving before him toward the darkness of sleep his flock of dreams”⁵⁹ The crook is a symbol of safety and protection in the passage to the hereafter, as happens in Psalm 23, among dream, sleep and death.

Besides, it is precisely in dreams, as he tells us in his poem in prose *Dream* that de Chirico sought the embrace with a “revenant” father after death, an almost mechanical one, very similar to the one in an armchair

57 A. Savinio, *Tragedia dell'infanzia*, I ed. Edizioni della Cometa, Rome 1937.

58 G. de Chirico, *The Memoirs...* cit., pp. 46-47.

59 G. de Chirico, *Hebdomeros*, cit., p. 96.

in the 1973 and 1974 *Prodigal Son* paintings: “In vain I struggle with the man whose eyes are crossed but very soft. Each time I throw my arms around him he escapes by gently opening his arms and these arms have an exceptional strength, an incalculable power, they are like irresistible levers, like all-powerful machines, these gigantic cranes that above the swarming work sites lift quarters of floating fortresses with heavy turrets like the breasts of antediluvian mammals. In vain I struggle with the man whose eyes are crossed but very soft; from each embrace, however furious, he gently frees himself smiling and scarcely opening his arms... it is my father who appears to me in dream and yet when I look at him he is not exactly the same as he was when he was living, during my childhood. And yet it is he; there is something more *distant* in his face’s expression, something that existed perhaps when I saw him alive and that now, after more than twenty years, appears to me in all its power when I see him again in dream”.⁶⁰

Reaching the end of his life, Giorgio de Chirico can find his father once again, both of them being revenants and aspiring to immortality and the consoling embrace.

After his many journeys, real and imaginary, after sighting and discovering the new lands of Metaphysical Art, after having explored the secrets of the painting and receiving ever new revelations, certain of his immortality as an artist, Ulysses-de Chirico, a solitary statue, is thus ready to set sail “for the other shore” on Böcklin’s boat of the last return and ready to find again, revenant among revenants, all his dear ones, at last to join, Prodigal Son and knight errant, in the eternal embrace with his Father at the frontiers of Time.

Translated by Denis Gailor



fig. 42 G. de Chirico,
The Prodigal Son, 1974

⁶⁰ G. de Chirico, *Rêve*, in “La Révolution Surrealiste”, Parigi, 1924; English translation, *Dream* in this periodical.